

Older Americans and Civic Engagement – Focus on Volunteerism

The Older Americans Act strongly supports volunteerism. Just a few examples of volunteerism that are supported by the Older Americans Act are the Foster Grandparents Program, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, and Benefits Counseling. Through the efforts of state units on aging and area agencies on aging, volunteerism by older Americans extends to many other settings, such as money management to make sure that bills are timely paid with the modest income of Social Security recipients, adult literacy programs, assisting in home-delivery of meals, and youth mentoring.

Volunteerism reflects what Justice Louis Brandeis of the U.S. Supreme Court stated many decades ago, that “The most important political office is that of private citizen.” A well-known visitor to America in its early days, Alexis de Tocqueville, impressed by the fervor for democracy in our young Republic, noted that “Each citizen must see the connection between self-interest and the common good.”

Volunteerism is one way that older persons can meet the duties of their high office. Volunteerism is one way that self-interest and the common good can meet.

In 2002, a survey of volunteerism was conducted among 600 older Americans. The results were reported in “The New Face of Retirement: An Ongoing Survey of American Attitudes on Aging,” by Peter D. Hart Associates. The survey found that “Older Americans are devoting increasing amounts of time to improving their community.”

The survey reported that more than one-third of older Americans think volunteering will be very important to them in their retirement. Volunteering, the survey found, is seen by seniors as a way of putting meaning into their own lives. Volunteerism contributes to a positive outlook on life.

The Hart survey found that volunteers scored high on their sense of optimism, empowerment, enjoyable social life, and productivity. Volunteers, the survey found, have a sense of being part of a team.

The positive outlook on life that is fostered by volunteerism has real consequences for longevity. A study funded by the National Institute on Aging determined that thinking positively can add over seven years to one's life span – more than good diet, exercise, or not smoking. “Thinking Positively About Aging Extends Life More than Exercise and Not Smoking,” Yale News Release, July 29, 2002. Thus, efforts devoted to fostering volunteerism, given its contribution to a positive outlook, can bring tremendous returns. Most people would highly concur that seven years of increased longevity is in their self-interest.

Examples of volunteerism carried out by seniors abound, at all levels. The National Silver-Haired Congress and the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature are two examples of volunteerism in the highest levels of policy-making. Those who attend and participate in public hearings conducted by area agencies on aging in the development of area plans on aging are volunteering their time in the highest calling – that of citizen. The same is true of those who serve on advisory councils to area agencies on aging. At the individual level, the Older Americans Act fosters a wide range of volunteerism.

The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (N4A), in its “Recommendations for the 2005 Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act,” has noted that the rapidly rising aging population will impact volunteerism. Fostering senior volunteerism is a focus of N4A. At the local level, of course, area agencies on aging are the office through which many seniors volunteer, such as through the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program and Benefits Counseling.

One means of fostering volunteerism can be through establishing and maintaining volunteer service banks. Those who volunteer can have their services recorded, for reference when the time arrives that they themselves may need the assistance of a volunteer. Such banks must, of course, not disfavor those who have not volunteered or not been able to volunteer. The bank should not necessarily be a responsibility of the area agency on aging. Indeed, volunteerism occurs through a wide variety of non-governmental entities. Thus, a very effective role for the area agency on aging would be to make use of existing information to provide technical assistance so that other entities in the area can develop and maintain volunteer service banks. This has the advantage of helping to avoid duplication of efforts, while supporting a wide array of hosts for volunteerism.

When de Tocqueville traveled our Republic in 1831, the telegraph was not yet in use. Now we have the Internet, which can be a further tool to make that link between self-interest and the common good. The point has now arrived that there is a “Virtual Volunteering Guidebook,” available without charge at <http://www.energizeinc.com/download/vvguide.pdf>. The guidebook is replete with information on recruitment and sustaining of those who volunteer online.

Given that volunteering online can be, in many instances, as effective as volunteering in-person, those who volunteer online should be given recognition, just as those who volunteer in person. Although the day has not been reached when all persons have access to the Internet, more and more persons do. This may be particularly true of professionals, who have had to use the Internet in their daily work.

Professionals may also be a very ready population, from which to recruit volunteers. Many professionals – lawyers, nurses, social workers, doctors, accountants, to name just a few – have a heritage of volunteering during working days. But the pressure of serving paying clients

and meeting the costs of overhead sometimes limits the volunteerism that professionals can do, until they retire.

Retired accountants can be excellent volunteer bill payers and representative payees in money management programs that help older persons pay their bills on time with their own Social Security benefits. Retirees with a health care background can provide excellent volunteer services in making sure that those receiving long-term care get proper treatment. Retired attorneys can provide excellent benefits counseling, so that the complex requirements of benefit programs can be successfully navigated. Of course, excellent volunteerism in all of these areas and many others is rendered by persons who do not have degrees or professional licenses.

Indeed, volunteerism is strongly present among those who do not hold professional licenses. The Hart survey found that volunteerism among those younger than fifty often centered around school activities related to children in the family. In short, the well of volunteerism is deep, wide, and constantly being replenished.

In view of the positive aspects for the individual who volunteers and for the common good, and given the tools available today to foster volunteerism, two solutions present themselves:

1. The aging network should provide information to organizations on how to establish and manage volunteer service banks, so that those who volunteer can have their services be recorded for use in responding to their own needs in the future, while not disfavoring those who have not volunteered or not been able to volunteer.
2. Volunteerism through online means should be given recognition as is face-to-face volunteerism.

It has been said that knowledge is power. Volunteerism, it is known, gives older persons

a sense of empowerment that can add years of longevity. The area agencies on aging have, locally and through their national association, given powerful recognition of the importance of volunteerism – the great importance today and the even greater importance for the future. Increased use in the future of volunteer service banks and increased recognition of the value of volunteerism through online means can serve to strengthen the link between self-interest and the common good. This will allow those in the highest office – that of citizen – to reach their full potential in contributing to society.

Submitted by:
Bruce P. Bower
Texas Legal Services Center
Suite 1100
815 Brazos
Austin, TX 78701
(512) 477-6000 (phone)
(512) 477-6576 (fax)
bbower@tlsc.org (email)

